

Congressman Rob Wittman (VA-1) sent a letter today to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, recommending an innovative way to address the serious claims backlog at the VA. Citing the performance of the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic at William and Mary Law School and its associated Helping Military Veterans through Higher Education Consortium, Wittman urged Secretary Shinseki to consider a formal partnership between the VA and the many *pro bono* law school veterans clinics nationwide that provide assistance to veterans mired in the claims process. Wittman released the following statement:

“Our nation’s veterans have made immeasurable sacrifices to defend our freedom, and the abysmal state of the VA’s claims backlog is preventing them from receiving the benefits and care that they have earned. The great folks at William and Mary Law School have done and continue to do a phenomenal job helping our veterans navigate the claims system, whether through compiling necessary documentation, submitting complex claim forms, or even coordinating medical evaluations. Without this assistance, these veterans would simply be at the mercy of a bloated, tangled system. A formal partnership between the VA and these *pro bono* clinics would allow for more effective representation and assistance for veterans struggling with the claims system. These veterans law clinics exist in nineteen states and others are considering adding them as well; we can and should use programs like William and Mary’s as national templates to improve the VA claims process and, more importantly, to help our veterans, whose service and sacrifice deserves better treatment than the *status quo*.”

The letter serves as a formal follow-up after the VA [asserted their willingness to work with schools’ veterans law clinics upon a question from Wittman](#), of VA Deputy Under-Secretary Danny Pummill at a joint hearing of the House Armed Services and House Veterans’ Affairs Committees on July 10, 2013.

The full text of the letter follows ( [click here for PDF](#) ):

July 30, 2013

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki

Secretary

Department of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Avenue, NW

Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write today to request that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) explore ways to formally partner with *pro bono* law school veterans clinics nationwide to leverage the incredible efforts of these higher education institutions, on behalf of our nation's veterans, to reduce the VA claims process strain. I appreciate you making the backlog of claims a top priority, and I believe partnering with these law school clinics would be an excellent way to help accomplish this goal.

In a joint hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and the House Armed Services Committee on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Deputy Undersecretary for Benefits, Mr. Danny Pummill, stated that he was willing to incorporate *pro bono* law schools efforts inside the benefit claims process. As you know, our nation's veterans face a claims backlog that delays benefits and care while the stressed claims system spends extraordinary effort to acquire supporting documentation for claims. The current practice often manifests itself in an even longer appeals process. A partnership that allows *pro bono* law clinics inside the claims process could have profound positive effects on the speed and accuracy of veterans' claims processing.

For example, the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic at William and Mary Law School, and the associated Helping Military Veterans through Higher Education Consortium (HMOVHE) have committed in-depth assistance to veterans to acquire and compile needed supporting documentation and complete assessments resulting in the submission of thorough and complete claims. I believe that we can use the Puller Clinic's method and their dedication to acquire requisite documentation, coordinate medical evaluations, and submit comprehensive claim forms as a template for *pro bono* law school veterans clinics across the nation.

The efforts of these clinics can lead to claims that are filed in a more comprehensive manner when they are submitted at the beginning of the process. A formal partnership with the VA and relationships with regional offices that allow the clinics inside the claims process would allow the *pro bono* lawyers to research and acquire necessary documentation as claims are being adjudicated, increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the claims process and preventing the lengthy appeal situation that many of our veterans face.

Currently, there are law schools in the following states that have created veterans law clinics: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. Law schools in Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Oregon are exploring development of similar clinics. By officially partnering with these schools, the veterans of our nation could benefit from and enjoy reduced time in the claims process.

I ask that you consider creating a formal relationship that allows *pro bono* law school veterans clinics inside the VA claims process to improve services to veterans across our nation. The Puller Clinic and HVMHE can also serve as a Center of Excellence to help educate and train law schools nationwide to coordinate with the VA and support the veterans to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude. The unique services of these clinics have the potential to greatly increase the efficiency and accuracy of the VA claims process and ultimately benefit veterans.

Sincerely,

Robert J. Wittman

Member of Congress

*Congressman Rob Wittman represents the First District of Virginia. He serves on the House Natural Resources Committee and the House Armed Services Committee where he is the Chairman of the Readiness Subcommittee.*